Géza von Molnár

Two Narratives, One Story, Sanguine Telling: *Faust* and Goethes's Reading of the First *Critique*

In the outgoing eighteenth century Kant was news. His pronouncements and those of his followers were received in a spirit of fervent personal engagement that seems far more appropriate for the political arena than the philosopher's study. Of course, his name was not all that current in the halls and chambers historians have taught us to regard as centers of political power brokage, but it certainly attained a remarkable degree of currency in private correspondence and public discourse among European intellectuals.

In our days and in this country, Kant has gained recognition as well. His name may no longer be news but it has come to be associated with stories that are. It is often insistently invoked, as though contending sides had chosen it for a parole to settle a conflict that has agitated campuses in the United States for the last decade. Such academic politics center around debates on literature in which poststructuralist trends, markedly those that have become known under the label of „deconstruction," are criticized by more traditional scholars for „destroying literary studies."[1] These critics cite Kant and are, in turn, cited for being heir to a misinterpretation of Kant that pervades the „institutionalized study of literature and the humanities generally in England and the United States."[2] In order for proponents of deconstruction to use Kant against Kant, the opposition had to be discredited and Schiller has, rather surprisingly, been dubbed the culprit responsible for introducing the misinterpretation of the original texts that has had such purportedly detrimental effects on „institutionalized study of literature" in the English speaking world.

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[1] My reference is to the title of Walter Jackson Bate's essay on this subject in *New Criterion* (December 1983).

[2] J. Hillis Miller, *The Ethics of Reading* (Columbia University Press, New York, 1987), p. 14.

These past years, hostilities have surfaced in the press with mounting consistency, culminating in revelations concerning Paul de Man's political literary past. Consequently, even more widespread attention has been focused on a matter that started as an academic squabble and has become a question of ethics very much in the public domain. It would seem that Kant's philosophy has always carried over into the realms of politics and art, specifically the literary arts, and I intend to explore some aspects of this connection that have apparently retained their pertinence.

The tenor and temper of the debate in the eighteenth century may well be gauged by glancing through the pages of Niethammer's „Philosophical Journal" (*Philosophisches Journal*). There, it becomes quite evident that the battle lines were clearly drawn between adherents to a new philosophy and representatives of institutionalized interests whose concerns went beyond questions of academic orthodoxy. Yet, it was orthodoxy that was at stake, theological orthodoxy it would seem, judging by the frequency with which Kantians felt called upon to counter the charge of atheism. However, such charges were hardly understood in any circumscribed sense as pertaining solely to speculative interests in religion. Particularly after 1789, atheism had come to assume an unmistakable political connotation that identified the denial of divine authority with the denial of this authority's derived secular forms.

As is well known, the opportunity for armed revolt did not present itself in German lands and no overt transfer of political power occurred in keeping with the French model. Although the streets may have remained relatively calm and no princely authoritarian of note was deposed by his subjects in that forcible a manner, the very concept of authority had definitely come under severe attack. None was more radical and sweeping than the one launched by Kant. A most unlikely revolutionary, he was, nonetheless, aware that his propositions would constitute as fundamental a „revolution" in human affairs as the one Copernicus had brought about in modern astronomy. Within less than two years after Kant had drawn this analogy, political events would underscore the urgency and appropriateness of his antiauthoritarian philosophical enterprise. This coincidence of philosophical and political concerns may well account for the inordinate reception afforded Kantian texts, especially among the young who, probably, would generally not have felt tempted by such forbiddingly difficult and abstract fare without further inducement.

In the „Preface" to the first edition of the *Critique of Pure*

Reason, Kant already states in straightforward language that religious and social institutions cannot rely on claims to „holiness" and „majesty" for their authority but must undergo the rigorous criticism he proposes as his own method.[3] This declaration of intent was clear enough; but, for its implications to become ever more fully apparent, the text that followed would have to be supplemented by a later edition and by the complementary *Critiques* of practical reason and of judgment.

Having been roused from his dogmatic slumber by David Hume,[4] Kant called for a general awakening to false authority where it had always ruled, needless of incidental trappings such as mitre and crown. The reveille he sounded was startling enough. It shocked his contemporaries into recognizing that representations of consciousness are not, and cannot be, identical with objects construed as things with their own identity. This simple insight broke the spell under which knowledge that refers to the world was necessarily equated with knowledge of the world.

Kant made this point quite emphatically from the very beginning, and there was no mistaking what he said. It amounted to a declaration of independence, if not, at first glance, expressly from tyrants, then certainly from the more universal tyranny of things. Unless it be an empty solipsist gesture, once independence of this sort is assumed, the entire burden of responsibility for objective validation must also shift from the thing known to the knower. In other words, the ability to know depends on the ability to validate, or, put in Kantian terms, the operations of theoretical reason are circumscribed by those of practical reason. The point is that knowledge referring to experience, which is the only kind of knowledge reason is capable of supplying in its theoretical capacity, cannot be said to condition human purpose; rather it is the idea of common human purpose that informs the pursuit of knowledge. This, at least, is what Kant's first *Critique* intimates when, in its final version, it assigns a horizon drawn by practical interest to the aims pursued by theoretical reason.

Both, the *Critique of Practical Reason* and the *Critique of Judgement* also emphasize the same pattern, but what remained implied in Kant's *Critiques* was made explicit in Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*. His concept of *Tathandlung* and the three axiomatic

[3] pp. IV ff.
[4] p. IV, „Prolegomena."

principles derived from it leave no doubt from the very beginning that the world we are able to know and explore assumes its reality for us as challenge, and thus potential medium, for the enactment of our freedom, freedom *from* all purpose rooted merely in individuated being and freedom *for* identifying the individuated self intersubjectively.

Essential to this way of thinking is the insight that intersubjective validity is not given with or by the object of experience but has to be given it instead. Since the bestowal of such intersubjective valence cannot be the result of an arbitrary act, which would carry only subjective validity, the act of bestowal has to be necessarily connected with the moment of givenness that characterizes all objects of experience as objects of experience. An object of experience can only be said to be known if it carries intersubjective valence, or, put differently, any object given in experience finds acceptance as an object of experience only as the potential object of reason.

Effectively, reason is perceived as the functional capacity that mediates between the incidentally given and the intersubjectively valid, and it can do so in both directions: in its raising the incidental to intersubjective validity, reason's operation is theoretical, whereas its function is practical when, by the subject's action, intersubjective validity is introduced into the given and ever shifting constellations of circumstances that affect the subject.

Essentially, then, objects assume intersubjective validity only insofar as they may be acted upon in that same sense, that is in the sense that action always carries intersubjective valence. The accent lies on the agent's and not the object's capacity to determine intersubjective validity, and this is the new self-understanding Kant's philosophy, frequently mediated by Fichte, bestows on its potential recipients. The gains derived from this new perspective are, indeed, as Friedrich Schlegel has claimed, revolutionary. It is a perspective from which the authority of the given is categorically put into question and laid open to denial. Foremost, it entails the denial of authority associated with the primacy of objects, an authority that, if left unchallenged, would restrict reason to an instrumental function exclusively. The same force of denial extends to the authority of aesthetic standards embodied by works of art that either have been or could be elevated to the rank of timeless models, which would consequently have to remain unsurpassed. Finally, the denial of authority applies also to socio-political institutions vouchsafed by norms rooted in the past that would make

tradition the ultimate court of appeal for legitimating societal structures of organization and interaction.

In Schiller's writings, most obviously in his *Aesthetic Letters*, the attempt is made to realize the potential for change inherent in each of these antiauthoritarian stances and to outline a sociopolitical program that would live up to their collective potential's promise. The cry to freedom, which is the most characteristic tone struck throughout his work, is basically an appeal to employ reason in its non-instrumental function, an appeal to each and every human being as an agent free to proclaim the bond of humanity rather than the humanity of bondage to the referential ground of experience and expedience. However, the unifying bond of freedom is not at all conceived in opposition to the experiential sphere.[5]

To the contrary, Schiller is at great pains to point out that his concept of freedom, which is also central to his understanding of any aesthetic experience, is not at all „figural" as opposed to „material," not at all „romantic" if that term is to imply advocacy of the imagination's autonomy, as is commonly believed.[6] Freedom is a concept that allows for a continuum of intersubjectivity as the necessary referential ground for objective validity, be that with regard to cognition, aesthetic judgement, or moral worth. It is the same principle that is operative in each of these endeavors, but their fundamental functional relationship becomes most clearly apparent for Schiller in the realm of aesthetic experience and enactment. The aesthetic does not mean the figural phantasm, for which it has so frequently been taken; it is the designation for a dynamic structural pattern comprising the interplay between the unifying and dispersive moments that characterize our sense of reality. Schiller does not understand these moments to constitute a dialectical relationship in which one is subsumed or subrempted by the other. It is not a matter of „figurality," replacing „materiality," or „form" replacing „content." Because it is no matter of replacement or displacement but of complementarity, Schiller insists on an „aesthetic" state as the socio-political model for a true

[5] Allegories of Reading, p. 208, p. 223 ff; also „Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant" in *Hermeneutics: Questions and Prospects*. Gary Shapiro and Alan Sica, eds. (Amherst: University of Massachussets Press, 1984), p. 136 ff. J. Hillis Miller, p. 14, simply refers to Schiller as though de Man's reading has become the normative standard.

[6] de Man, „Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant," p. 137.

democracy and, conversely, on the state, if it is to be „the edifice of true political freedom," as „the most perfect of all works of art" („Second Letter").

Although Schiller's reading of Kant may have been criticized by previous as well as contemporary scholars, the Kantian roots of his major theoretical pronouncements were never in doubt. It has also been customary for scholars to assign him the role of mediator through whose efforts Goethe was led to test the paths of critical philosophy, if only for the duration of their friendship, from 1794 until Schiller's death in 1805. This truism, for all its entrenchment in traditional scholarship, is quite without merit. Goethe had read the first and third *Critiques* in the winter of 1790/91, a detail that was easy to overlook since he refers to it only briefly some thirty years later. The reference is brief but quite illuminating since it mentions approvingly the annotations and markings he had made in his personal copies to guide him through this unaccustomed world of abstraction, which, according to his own words, he „succeeded in penetrating ever more deeply" („Einwirkung der neueren Philosophie," 1820).

The pencilled entries with which Goethe had marked passages that were of specific interest furnish the unmatched record of a highly charged narrative. It is the story of what Kant had to tell a reader who was to become the author of *Faust*, the author of a tale that plumbs every depth and danger, the pitfalls as well as the heights, encountered by the human spirit bent on declaring its independence. Here, again, freedom is at issue. The poetic resonance Schiller gave it is well known, but Goethe is not readily cited as its equally eager apostle. Yet, he proclaims freedom as well. He does so more subtly perhaps, feeling his way cautiously but with inordinate staying power and determination. The story of what Kant had to tell him along this way bears retelling since it helped outline some of the crucial passages on the path Faust would eventually travel, and with him an immense readership to this very day.

The drama of Faust's history preoccupied Goethe from its Wertherian inception in the early seventies of the eighteenth century until the end of his life in 1832. Initially, Faust is presented as Werther's brother, as an individual who has encountered the limits that mark the sphere allotted the faculties of human endeavor, in this case faculties comprising the extent of human knowledge. Unlike Werther, Faust rattles at the gate of his confinement and does not accept the realm of literature as his temporary abode,

until it, too, would prove unlivable as it had done for Werther.[7] Magic would seem to be the way out, but there matters remain and it is not at all clear how Faust's tragic love affair thereafter, tragic for his young and innocent partner, Gretchen, more so than for him, might be linked to this beginning.

Indications are that, at this stage in the course of the dramatic narrative's composition, a pact with the devil was envisioned in a rather traditional manner. Such pacts were designed to allow their human contractors freedom from restrictions that prevent them from living out their desires. For Goethe's Faust this might at most have resulted in opening avenues of exploration in no way different from those offered his nominal predecessors, except for the potentially exhaustive degree to which the extent of human desire could have been probed. Judging by the Gretchen episode, this potential would have remained just that, a potential. Its apt realization was left to de Sade, who, without benefit of antiquated rituals like an official devil's pact, rendered what must be considered the most consequential treatment of the topic.

The gap in the Faustian drama between erotic adventure and the initial scene of confinement marked by monologic isolation and entombment among tomes of worthless knowledge is eventually filled by an encounter with the devil, but only after Goethe had read Kant. It is an encounter that does not, however, culminate in the expected pact between the prince of darkness and a hapless victim who mistakes the dark for light and isolation of self for freedom. Instead, the reader is confronted with a very human devil in Mephistopheles, someone who presents himself as an utter skeptic capable of no greater temptation than having Faust challenge categorically his categorical stance of denial. The result is a wager, with Faust betting on the efficacy of the human spirit's aspirations, which, he insists, transcend the bounds of what experience has to offer, and his opponent putting his faith in the self-delusive nature of any such contention. How it came to this remarkable confrontation from which the entire drama derives its lasting and ultimate direction is undoubtedly a complex story, but the best part of it has, so far, remained untold. It is composed by the pencilled markings in Goethe's copies of Kant's *Critiques*, and my purpose is to

[7] Géza von Molnár, „Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship as an Alternative to Werther's Fate," *Goethe Proceedings*, eds. Clifford Bernd et al. (Columbia, S. C.: Camden House, Inc. 1984), 77-91.

trace out some of the pertinent portions as they are found in the *The Critique of Pure Reason.*

Goethe's entries do not begin until after the „Transcendental Aesthetic." They set in with the „Transcendental Logic's" first part, the „Transcendental Analytic," and reach their first crescendo at the end of Book I in the section dealing with issues that form the very fulcrum of Kant's Copernican revolution.

The most substantial entry among the initial dozen or more covers a passage of eighteen lines in the original,[8] a good two thirds of the page, and it is easily discernible why. The project of the entire *Critique* is here succinctly defined historically. Locke and Hume are cited as representative for having suffered shipwreck on the two cliffs that threaten contemporary philosophical enterprise. To their great detriment, both neglected to recognize what Kant is about to demonstrate, which is that the concepts entitling us to pronounce summary judgment on any subject or sequence of events are concepts reason brings to and does not deduce from experience. They are pure concepts, as for example is the concept of causality, and Locke as well as Hume attributed this purity to their being distillates from experience. Thus purified, Locke thought them applicable to speculation independent of their grounding in the experiential realm, and Kant felt that in taking this position the famous man, as he puts it, had opened the doors wide to all manner of „*Schwärmerei.*" That term might be most fittingly rendered in this context as signifying religious fanaticism or religion with no better foundation than superstition or, quite generally, a combination of ecstatic enthusiasm, visionary excess, and reveries of the imagination with claims to being knowledge of incontrovertible truths. Hume, on the other hand, had been more cautiously observant and did not ask the pure distillates of experience to carry more than they could bear. To the contrary, he fully recognized their limitation, saw that no concepts derived from experience could encompass its every eventuality as claimed, and did not hesitate to draw his conclusions, which necessarily led him to proclaim a position of unambiguous skepticism. Its thrust was directed at our trust in the certainty of concepts that allow us to regard the world in which we live within a framework that lends it a sufficient degree of stability for our orientation. Hume showed

[8] For all relevant passages marked by Goethe consult: Géza von Molnár, *Goethes Kantstudien*, „Schriften der Goethe-Gesellschaft", vol. 64 (Weimar: Hermann Böhlaus Nachfolger, 1994), 178–199, 261–264, 282–289.

that no concept is capable of performing this task as long as it is thought to originate with experience, and he thought all such concepts must necessarily originate in this manner. Too much, resulting in „Schwärmerei," and too little, resulting in a confounding skepticism, those are the cliffs philosophy must avoid if it is not to suffer shipwreck. This is the dilemma, and Kant stands ready to resolve it with his critical approach to philosophy that, at this juncture in the proceedings, is about to enter into a transcendental deduction of the concepts in question, showing them to be categorical and *a priori* to experience rather than *a posteriori* derivatives.

The arguments that follow immediately are not so much concerned with the individual concepts involved as with grounding them in their entirety on a unifying principle capable of establishing without question their priority to any acts of cognition. From this ground they will have to derive their spontaneity that manifests itself in their synthesizing function, which we insist on ascribing to them, although Hume's skepticism would deny us the right to do so. At its very beginning, the *Critique of Pure Reason* was poised to reestablish that right, with Kant stating in the „Introduction" (39, 27-29: B 19) that the *Critique*'s composition owes purpose and direction to the question: „how are synthetic judgments *a priori* possible?" To put what is at stake into less abstract language, the question is: „by what right do I assume, as I do, that the sun will always rise in the East if my judgment is merely based on observations that fall far short of ‚always'?"

Over the next twenty-odd pages containing paragraphs 15 – 24 of the *Critique*'s „Part I," entitled „The Doctrine of Elements," Goethe's markings reach a remarkable degree of density. It is a sign that he follows very closely, and also quite critically, Kant's central arguments that effectively relocate the synthesizing function required for cognition from the object of knowledge to the act of knowing. The belief in a thing identical with itself, in other words a „thing in itself," which could as such enter any individual consciousness had, in the course of the preceding discussion, been revealed as make-believe. The „thing in itself" had proved to be a fiction requiring for its credibility all the known variants of metaphysical speculation that Kant refers to as „*Schwärmerei*," which ultimately cannot hold up under the skeptic's keen gaze.

The latter's triumph would open the very gates to the nihilistic void whose agent Mephistopheles confesses himself to be. This is actually his traditional role. The untraditional element in Goethe's characterization is the positive function he assigns the „*Spirit of*

Negation" by divine decree in the „Prologue in Heaven." It parallels the function Kant assigns in a less dramatic manner to the skeptic, whom he holds in high regard for the unfolding of his own narrative. At this point, Kant proposes to avoid the impasse that confronts him by taking his cue from the skeptic and to eschew reliance on insupportable fiction. If the anchor of self-identity cannot be found outside acts of cognition, it might be more successfully sought out as inherent to them. The key to this strategy is also its resolution, and Kant introduces it straightaway under the designation of „pure or actually originary apperception" („reine. . .oder auch ursprüngliche Apperception" 108, 27-29: 132). He employs this terminology in order to identify consciousness of self that accompanies all moments of consciousness that have objective referents. Consciousness of self or, to avoid a formulation misleadingly close to Descartes, consciousness of consciousness does not depend on any given object and constitutes in this respect the sought after *a priori* moment of identity. It is *a priori*, not in the guise of a static object but as the spontaneous contribution cognizing brings to any of its incidental functions, which further identifies pure or transcendental apperception as the horizon of possibility for all cognition. As such, it is the highest principle of the human capability to know, the capability Kant calls the faculty of „understanding" (*Verstand*), and the categorical concepts comprising its functional range include the concept of causality. Kant goes on to define the function of understanding as a mediating activity empowered to bring the manifold of phenomena presented to consciousness (*Vorstellungen*) under the unity of transcendental apperception. This effectively means that the categories of understanding are, indeed, authorized to render synthetic judgments *a priori* since they introduce the comprehensive unity required for such judgment as grounded in the facticity of transcendental apperception, which spans the entire range of all phenomena that can possibly be presented to consciousness as objects of cognition.

Thus far Goethe was apparently able to follow Kant's lead without having to leave the solid earth of his accustomed naive realism entirely behind. He quite regularly picks out Kant's repeated assurances that the qualifiers of priority and spontaneity assigned to intellective functions have their applicability only with reference to the given data conveyed through sense perception. Even now, after establishing transcendental apperception as a spontaneously grounded dimension of self-identity, Kant reconfirms for his readers that the realm of phenomena presented to consciousness re-

quires for its constitution the dual referential ground of the manifold given to sensual intuition under the formal conditions of space and time as well as, in his words, „the originary synthetic unity of the apperception" („[die] ursprünglich-synthetische Einheit der Apperception" 136).

However, after having made this summary point, Kant earns two question marks from Goethe, when he proceeds to locate the criterion for objectivity in the originary apperception. Since there is no object of cognition outside its horizon, there would also be no objectivity independent of it. These considerations appear to effect a total withdrawal from the accustomed material reality to which Goethe's common sense and scientific investigative stance cling, and he would seem to express his doubts with the appropriately questioning markers affixed to the offending paragraphs (18 and 19). Later on he regains his footing, but in the subsequent passages that deal with the power of the imagination, he singles out its freely productive function without manifesting the slightest need to regain his „realistic" balance by dwelling with equal intensity on the imagination's other functional context, which is reproductive because its products are phenomena and as such not purely self-representative.

Confirmed in his poetic freedom and reassured existentially, Goethe continues his reading of the *Critique*. The aspects that are of interest to him have no immediate bearing on the *Faust* theme, until he reaches „The Transcendental Dialectic," where the antinomies of pure reason are discussed from the perspective of the interests that lead to such futile endeavor. It is rather indicative that the cluster of markings extending over five pages in the original occur after the preceding 140 pages were left without any entries at all. Apparently, the marked passages were of very particular significance to Goethe.

The 140 pages left without specific marks of attention deal with the definition of ideas as concepts of pure reason that have no experiential context to which they refer, except as unifying principles guiding the operations of rational understanding. If the concepts of pure reason are employed as though they were concepts of understanding with applicability to experiential contexts, the antinomial relations of an oppositional impasse arise that ultimately lead once again to the confrontation already made familiar by Kant's having cited Hume and Locke. Pure reason becomes entangled in the self-divisive impasse of antinomial confrontation with itself because questions arise for it that demand answers for which

there is no referential ground of experience. Questions are open-ended and very much in accordance with pure reason's totalizing function, but answers call for conclusions. Taken by themselves, the questions posed by pure reason allow Kant to open a new avenue of investigation designed to lead out of the impasse of interminable confrontation that had characterized Western philosophical tradition over the centuries of its insistence on answering those questions. Goethe appears receptive to Kant's guidance at this juncture and readily identifies the passages that are most crucial in effecting the promise of resolving a persistent dilemma, which – as the text informs its readers – has its beginning with the Platonic and Epicurean schools of thought (B 499–500).

The antinomies attendant to the cosmological idea constitute a series of four positions easily identifiable as theses and antitheses. Goethe marks the lot, as cited. Essentially, the theses comprise the claims that the world has a beginning, that the self's nature is self-identical and thus indestructible, that there is freedom of action, and that there is an originary being as the source of all being. Corollary antithetical positions may be advanced with equal justification, or rather lack thereof. Either set of positions is dogmatic, with the one identifiable as dogmatism of pure reason and the other as empirical dogmatism.

The questions that lead to such dogmatic hardening are founded on interests, which Kant defines as practical and theoretical, in accordance with the basic assignments comprising the entire range of intellective functions. Those interests are fundamental since they fuel all human agency. As such, they are not subject to criticism, but recourse to dogmatism in complying with them is. Generally speaking, Kant's juxtaposing of the two spheres of interest drives home the point that, if viewed from the proper critical perspective, they exercise a mutually limiting effect on one another.

Practical interest is best served on the thetical side of the antinomies since action may be validated in terms other than those that classify experience. For a free agent, an agent not pragmatically determined, this terminology would have to be derived entirely *a priori* from pure reason. Free agency is not subject to theoretical judgment. It is subject to practical judgment, which introduces a framework of validation onto experience through enactment, and this validation neither seeks confirmation nor opens itself to denial from knowledge that has its referential ground in experience. Such knowledge is theoretical and its limits are clearly marked by the domain of practical interest. As Kant's arguments are designed

to show, theoretical knowledge is not entitled to deny what it cannot know, and any attempt to do so may only be upheld in the barren confines of dogmatic empiricism. Conversely, any pretensions to knowledge the impetus of practical interest may inspire are legitimately open to the test of empirical inquiry. It is in this context that the antithetical set of claims in the antinomial juxtaposition exercises a most salutary effect since it undermines the bastion of dogmatism traditional metaphysics erected for those who prefer the shelter of closure over the risk of unmitigated exposure.

If we return to the topic of *Faust* with the gains derived from Kant's critical perspective on the problem posed by the antinomies, the relevance of his discourse is easily apparent. In pursuing his theoretical goals toward comprehensive knowledge, Faust had actually attempted to retrace the path that had led to the establishment of the medieval society he could no longer be part of. Once he recognized the dogmatism of pure reason for what it is, there is no returning to its shelter. The final disillusionment occurs when the full philosophical realization sets in that the promise of such ill founded knowledge cannot be kept. The purely intellectually sponsored image of totality lacks an experiential counterpart: it is „ein Schauspiel nur," a mere apparition, as he is forced to acknowledge after contemplating the sign of the macrocosm (430 – 455). His next move is to adopt the empiricist posture, only to experience that the bewildering infinity of phenomena refuses human comprehension, as he must admit to the Earth Spirit (460 – 517). After this skeptical rebuke, he sees no alternative but despair, which in his case leads to the brink of suicide.

The interest underlying all of Faust's speculative efforts is basically one aimed at attaining a perspective of totalizing knowledge that would permit him to command a vantage point from which his existence may be endowed with meaning in the order of things. This is essentially, as Kant has argued and Goethe has noted, a practical interest that cannot be satisfied by theoretical means. The task that confronts Goethe, once he takes up his Faustian project again after having read the *Critique*, is the same Kant dealt with in resolving the impasse of the antinomies. Faust will have to undergo a reeducation in which it becomes apparent that the process of living is itself free to introduce the meaning it seeks to derive in vain from the order of things.

Cured of his misguided theoretical ambitions but not of his despondency, Faust must be challenged in a manner that would

rekindle his interest and set him on a path appropriate to it. In short, he must be made to enter the path of practical engagement and to accomplish this feat Goethe has him confront Mephistopheles who is the representative of empirical dogmatism in its purest form. The dogma he proclaims is simple. He claims the interest that had fueled Faust's every ambition can be put to rest with one or the other of the world's trinkets, if only Faust were to enter this world as his active partner in their pursuit. In effect, he declares the ideal dimension that sponsors this interest, the dimension comprising the proper function of pure reason, non-existent.

Faust may be no more enlightened than before concerning the nature of the interest that had inspired him thus far, but he knows enough about it to challenge any assertion of its denial with unshakable conviction. Faust's challenge takes the form of a bet that experience will prove Mephisto wrong. He bets he will not mistake for his life's fulfillment any of the offerings behind which his opponent tries to hide the eternal void that pronounces meaninglessness on all of being; however, should an offer tempt him to proclaim it of eternal worth, the void unmasked, the total deprivation that is hell, shall be fulfillment proper for a life whose goal had freely been defined in terms of no superior significance.

The pact is transformed into a bet, and this has always been thought Goethe's most original invention for redirecting the Faust theme. That is entirely true but the inspiration may well have come from Kant. In the „Doctrine of Methods," the last of the *Critique*'s two „Parts," Kant discusses the concept of the bet and Goethe lavishes his most concentrated attention on the eleven pages that cover the topic. I have commented on the details of this study elsewhere.[9] For the present, it may suffice to say that Kant introduces the bet as a mechanism that is best suited to settle disputes based on belief, which differs from knowledge in that the experiential ground of reference is still, or may be permanently, outstanding. This is exactly the situation Goethe has Faust confront when he offers his bet. The conviction he harbors that human aspirations are wedded to a meaningful contextuality must not be confused with idle make-believe. This he insists on, even though such contextuality will never be the object of knowledge accessible to the operations of rational understanding, as his experiences have taught him.

[9] „Die Wette biet' ich'" *Geschichtlichkeit und Aktualität*, eds. Klaus Detlev Müller et.al. (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1989) 29-50.

Succinctly put, Faust has nothing more to go on than his bare practical interest. He calls it „the human spirit's high striving" (1676) and stakes the worth of human existence, its meaningfulness or nullity, on the belief in that striving's intrinsic efficacy. The final goal may continue to be elusive but that is no longer of central concern to the Faust who has forsworn all theoretical enterprise and considers his „mind cured of its passion for knowledge" (1768). Now, concern focuses on the pure momentum of interest or striving, which constitutes a movement that is suspended between deprivation and fulfillment. As such, it is a movement of negation that carries with it the power, and imparts the ability, to deny worth to the worthless and to recognize deprivation for nothing else but for what it is. In other words, the intrinsic efficacy of Faust's practical interest, which he calls striving, manifests itself in the ability to say no to any and all moments along the path that fall short of his interest's ambition.

A bet, even one between Faust and Mephistopheles, seems a matter uncomplicated enough to make one wonder why, if at all, philosophers of Kant's standing must be troubled in its behalf. If it were merely a bet as any other and, in this instance, a simple literary device to add excitement to the plot, the *Critique* would have to be left out of the discussion entirely. This bet is different, though. True, it is a literary device and it undoubtedly adds excitement to the plot, as all critics have been more than ready to note, but above all it serves to effect a crucial switch in the narrative, without interrupting its continuity. The transition from scholar to agent in worldly affairs, from the theoretical to the practical mode, is made smoothly and with all the critical implications intact that have lifted the telling of this Faust tale into a class by itself. In order to accomplish this, or rather to read the bet this way, Kant offers a most helpful perspective. The reason he introduces the topic at all – a topic hardly standard in philosophical discourse – is easily identified as the very same that also occasions its introduction in *Faust*.

For Kant, betting allows for a theoretically founded assertion that still awaits its legitimation with reference to experience, and the difference must be bridged by practical means. It is this difference that is important since it introduces a practical dimension into the theoretical realm, without which the latter would have a tendency to function in self-sufficient isolation leading, as was shown, to the impasse of the antinomies.

A bet introduces truth on credit, so to speak: an assertion is made independent of an experiential base and it remains open to

skeptical attack until experience resolves the matter. In the meantime, one must act upon that assertion for lack of any firmer ground, a ground of certainty. In thus acting, one stakes as high a commitment on the outcome as the degree of „conviction" - it is not „knowledge" without applicability to experience – under which the action is initiated will permit. If the experiential realm cannot possibly corroborate a conviction, and if that conviction pertains to the worth of existence *per se*, then the worth of existence is at stake and the bet can only be formulated negatively, exactly as Faust does by stating that no possible experience will ever serve to disprove his conviction.

The bet serves as a turnstile in Goethe's narrative, precisely as the passages he marked in the *Critique* suggest. Faust enters theoretically bankrupt and emerges committed to a potentially unlimited practical endeavor, guided only by his firm conviction of the merit intrinsic to his practical interest that is to characterize his striving.

If only striving were at issue, Faust's commitment would be to endless strife, and since he knows no better initially, that is exactly what he commits himself to. But striving in and for itself is not at issue, and here the Kantian text can help to widen the perspective that has remained far too narrow for scholars to date. Basically, practical interest is at issue, and Faust will have to learn this in a process of education that leads from erotic encounter to immersion in the aesthetic realm and ultimately to challenge in the sociopolitical arena where the process ends in a vision. This vision is actually a final act of self-comprehension. The knowledge he had so ardently sought outside was to be found inside all along. Now, blind to the constantly changing constellations of his environment and their attendant demands on him to act, Faust recognizes that he as well as every human being is a free agent. He is free of external determinants not only because he happens to be blind to them but because he and everyone else is quite independent of them and in this independence capable of validating them in terms of common human value. The capability to do so rests with pure reason in its practical employment and the practical instinct Faust relied on as his guide finds satisfaction in the knowledge that the meaning of human existence constitutes a task each individual must realize as a free moral agent. With this understanding the course has been run, and it is conveyed to Faust by the vision of „free" people on „free" soil earning their „freedom" each day by exercising it to maintain and constantly form anew the bonds of

their community. To this vision, Faust may say his long deferred yes. It is a yes to the same conviction he has held from the very inception of the bet, only now he also knows that each and every experience may serve to reflect the efficacy of his practical interest. The difference is that to the negative moment an affirmative one can be added in each instant, an affirmative one that seeks to eternalize the instant as humanly valid. Faust's yes is the final no to Mephisto's denial of Faust's conviction and thus the bet is won on Kant's moral ground translated into imagery that reflects very much the socio-political edifice Schiller had hoped for.

Of course, no such edifice was ever erected, nor has Faust's vision yet gained entry into the narrative historians construe of our culture's recent past. Instead, we see the lush unfolding of „Schwärmerei" with banners bearing insignias of absolutes waving everywhere, and there is much work for skeptics, who proliferate with equal abandon and dogmatic insistence. These last years, it seemed to me, as though the spectacle of factional strife in our collective study bore some resemblance to the „study"-scenes in *Faust*: there was the challenge that, no matter what our aspirations, we are restricted to the referential ground of linguistic self-referentiality. This challenge has elicited much protest and, possibly, a latter day successor to Faust has already made his or her wager. But then, how would we know, except for a retelling of the story? Or should that rather be: except for an enactment of the drama? After all, is it not possible that Mephistopheles is entirely within his rights when he insists on blood being „a juice of very special kind (1740)," the only kind, actually, required for the signature empowered to trace out this tale in its retelling? Is it, perhaps, the undisclosed always to be disclosed risk of this wager that, if he is to claim uncontested sovereignty, Mephistopheles must insist on an endorsement in blood but that in doing so he necessarily opens himself to the eventuality of forfeiting the very sovereignty he would wish to claim?